

The origin of the meticulous refined and persevering temperament of the Chinese

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Introduction

Where does the meticulous, refined and persevering temperament that we readily attribute to the Chinese come from? Far from being a simple national trait, this temperament seems to be rooted in a set of deeply coherent psychological, social and symbolic structures. To understand its origins, it is useful to take a detour via psychoanalysis. This offers a useful framework for understanding how a civilisation collectively shapes the management of impulses, defilement and control. This detour will allow us to understand how the Chinese channel, sublimate and socialise these primal forces.

I. The psychoanalytic model of control

1. The anal stage: control and order

During the first phase of Freud's theory of psychosexual development, the oral stage, the child is passive, subject to those around them in order to satisfy their needs¹. In the second phase, known as the anal stage, which corresponds to toilet training, the child discovers both the pleasure of retention and that of expulsion. For the first time, they are in a position to confront their desire in the face of authority: choosing whether to give or withhold their faecal output. Hence the psychological structuring of the relationship to

- **order**,
- **retention (greed)**,
- **obstinacy**.

The successful sublimation of these traits becomes the foundation of a personality inclined towards regularity, self-control and a job well done. But if this fails, the result can be obsessive neurosis characterised by intrusive rituals, incessant scruples and anxious perfectionism.

2. The two possible extremes

The psychoanalytic school thus distinguishes between two opposing imbalances:

Structure	Mechanism	Consequence
Obsessive neurosis	Excessive control and repression	Rigidity, guilt, rituals
Psychosis	Defective symbolisation and framework	Overflow, delirium, loss of reality

Psychic equilibrium lies between these two extremes. In Western society, depending on the era, obsessive neurosis is favoured (Victorian England, Freud's Vienna), or conversely, psychosis when the institutional father figure fades away under the influence of a culture of unlimited individual choice (to the point of surgical reassignment of sexual identity) and the loss of collective symbolic reference points.

¹Freud identifies three stages in the development of sexuality: oral, anal, and genital.

II. The ecology of excrement: collective sublimation

1. The valorisation of waste

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, China established a remarkable system for collecting and recycling human excrement. In cities, specialised corporations collected waste, which was then sold to farmers to fertilise arable land. The city fed the countryside, and the countryside fed the city: a complete and accepted organic cycle.

This waste economy radically transforms Freudian symbolism: what in the West is an object of shame and repression becomes in China **a useful and socialised material**. Whereas Western children learn to hide soiling, Chinese children grow up in a world where organic matter circulates, is transformed and contributes to common prosperity.

2. Effect on the psychic structure

This collective management produces a **socialised sublimation**:

- The retention drive is integrated into the economic circuit;
- Individual control merges with the smooth functioning of the collective;
- Public utility takes over from private repression.

This creates a form of psychological balance: instinctual energy is neither repressed (neurosis) nor expelled from the symbolic realm (psychosis); it is **recycled** into social contribution.

3. A functional superego

In this context, the superego is not the guilt-inducing authority of "Thou shalt not", but the internalisation of a **duty of harmony**: breaking the cycle of exchange, wasting, and unnecessarily dirtying becomes the ultimate sin. Moral virtue is identified with the continuity of the vital flow between members of the collective.

III. The "middle way": a psychology of sublimation

1. Between obsession and delirium

This system of social balance achieves what psychoanalysis would call a **middle way** between pathological extremes. Whereas the West has, depending on the era, engendered an obsession with control (Victorian England, Austria in Freud's time) or, conversely, desymbolisation through the dissolution of the institutional father figure, China has built a stable framework of sublimation: neither repression nor foreclosure.

The traits of anality described by Freud – order, meticulousness, perseverance – become **civic virtues** here. Calligraphy, ideography, patience in learning, and the art of craftsmanship or administrative precision reflect this channelled energy: control becomes aesthetic, repetition becomes discipline, retention becomes constancy.

2. An illustrative anecdote

An anecdote frequently reported in the official Chinese press powerfully illustrates this cultural attitude towards matter and defilement. It does not come from Xi Jinping's personal writings, but from an episode he recalled publicly upon his return to Liangjiahe, the village in Shaanxi where he had been sent as an educated youth during the Cultural Revolution from the age of fifteen to twenty-two.

According to the *People's Daily* of 16 February 2015, President Xi Jinping reported the following:

*One day, I was repairing the biogas digester; the pipe was blocked. When I unblocked it, the slurry spurted out and splashed me from head to toe. Everyone laughed, and so did I, saying, "It's nothing, let's keep going!"*²

The digester in question was a fermentation pit built by villagers and educated youth, fed by a mixture of human and animal excrement, water and plant residues. This rudimentary system produced methane for cooking and lighting, while recycling organic waste into fertiliser.

This scene, with its disarming simplicity, says it all. The head of state makes no attempt to hide the episode: he recounts it as a formative experience, a symbol of humility and community service. In a culture shaped by the value placed on manual labour and the organic continuity between town and country, physical hardship is not seen as humiliating, but as a rite of passage into rural life, undertaken without shame or distance.

For the villagers, Xi was "an educated young man who read books as thick as bricks", a phrase that expresses both the respect and bewildered fraternity of the rural world towards the intellectual. Where a Western leader would undoubtedly have sought to conceal such a misadventure, Xi Jinping has turned it into a testament to endurance, closeness to the people and communion with reality — faithful to the Confucian spirit of service to the collective.

The episode takes on a broader symbolic significance here: it depicts the crossing of defilement as an initiatory passage, where impure matter becomes a source of energy and light. By confronting the lowest substance — a mixture of human and animal excrement that, through fermentation, generates biogas — Xi Jinping re-enacts on an individual scale the very cycle of cosmic transformation: corruption that nourishes, decomposition that illuminates. This gesture, both concrete and spiritual, encapsulates the Chinese worldview, where purity is defined not by the exclusion of the impure, but by its transmutation.

3. Channelling delirium: state divination

While the anal drive found its material sublimation, the "delusional crucible"³ of the unconscious, this tendency to see signs everywhere, found an institutional channel in China: divination. During the Shang (-1600 to -1046) and Zhou (-1046 to -256) dynasties, divination by reading cracks on cattle shoulder blades or hot-punched turtle shells was a state protocol. The cracks in the bones or shells were interpreted according to precise rules to guide political, agricultural or military decisions. Everything depended on the scribe-diviners attached to the royal and ducal courts.

A central feature of psychotic delirium is interpretative thinking: the subject is overwhelmed by meanings, connections and signs that impose themselves on them in an uncontrollable way. The whole world 'speaks' to them and becomes the stage for a drama in which they are the centre.

The state divination of ancient China institutionalised this process precisely:

²*People's Daily* (人民日报), "Xi Jinping Returns to Yan'an to Visit the People of the Old Revolutionary Base Area," 16 February 2015, p. 1.

Original text: 有一次，他修沼气池，管子堵了，扒开一看，‘哧’的一声，污水喷了他一身。大家都笑了，他也笑，说：‘没事儿，继续干！’

Faithful translation: The pipe of the biogas digester was blocked. When he unblocked it, the slurry — a mixture of human and animal excrement — gushed out and splashed me from head to toe. Everyone laughed, and so did I, saying, 'It's okay, let's keep going!'

³The expression is from Pierre Legendre, legal historian and psychoanalyst.

- **The delirious episode is programmed:** revelation is not a spontaneous and frightening event, but an official, planned ritual reserved for the elite (king, lineages) to answer crucial questions of state (war, harvest, disease, city foundation). Society awaits and provokes revelation.
- **The delirious crucible is channelled through a meticulous protocol:** the process is extremely codified. The question (命辭, *mingci*) is formulated in binary terms ("It will rain / It will not rain"). The technical act (heating) is not left to chance. The interpretation (占辭, *zhanci*) is carried out by specialists, according to a formalised repertoire.

Thus, the ritual channels psychotic delirium:

- It frames the surge of meaning;
- It transforms excessive interpretation into public service;
- It connects the message of the invisible to concrete action.

The delirious outburst becomes a matter of institutional divination. The chaos of meaning is tamed by the symbolic structure.

4. Writing as stabilisation of the symbolic

The divination records inscribed on turtle shells or bovine shoulder blades are the origin of Chinese ideography: the oracular characters engraved on bones gradually became ideograms. Chinese writing, in turn, channels excess control. The literate calligrapher is not a maniac, but a craftsman of the sign; each stroke is an exercise in inner mastery. Thus, ideography socialises obsessive compulsion just as state divination ritualises interpretative thought.

This dual movement – the sublimation of matter and the ritualisation of meaning – forms the core of the Chinese cultural psyche: a continuous transformation from the low to the high, from the corporeal to the symbolic, from the instinctual to the cosmological.

5. From matter to symbol: cultural transmutation

The journey we have taken, from the Liangjiahe digester to the oracular shells of the Shang, reveals a constant feature of Chinese civilisation: the ability to **convert the formless into form**, defilement into ritual, waste into symbol.

Where other cultures have opposed body and spirit, China has sought to organise their continuity, as if the whole of reality were part of the same flow of transformation.

The manure test experienced by the young Xi Jinping encapsulates this dynamic: the lowest matter becomes fuel, then light. The rite of divination, for its part, transmutes the anguish of meaning into collective structure. Finally, ideographic writing fixes this circulation in time, transforming the gesture of fire on bone into a brushstroke on silk.

Thus, the same transmutational logic is affirmed, both ethical and cosmological:

- **ethical**, because it values the work of matter as inner asceticism,
- **cosmological**, because it inscribes every human gesture in the universal rhythm of transformation.

Chinese civilisation does not repress impulse, it **channels** it, **tames** it, **makes it bear fruit**.

Defilement is not the opposite of purity: it is its ferment. Delirium is not the negation of reason: it is

its source of symbolic energy. Matter and spirit are not mutually exclusive — they engender each other.

This principle, which the *Yi Jing* and *Wu Xing* systematise in the form of cycles of transmutation, finds its primary expression here: **Chinese spirituality arises from the very act of transforming the impure into harmony**, that is, from work, ritual and writing — three modes of sublimation.

6. The persevering, meticulous and refined temperament of the Chinese

The episode of the Liangjiahe biodigester, reported by Xi Jinping, is a civilising gesture. It condenses, in a concrete moment, the transmutation of excrement into energy, of filth into light — in other words, the symbolic mastery of organic matter, the driving force behind an inner and collective transformation.

This relationship with the body, fermentation and matter can be seen as the source of a unique **cultural temperament**: persevering, meticulous, patient and refined.

For nearly eight centuries (between 1200 and 400 BCE), China developed the most sophisticated forms of this transformation:

1. the development of a **refined ideography**, derived from oracular inscriptions;
2. **the meticulous archiving** of hundreds of thousands of divination records engraved on bones and shells;
3. their **classification into 64 typical situations**, symbolised by the hexagrams of *the Yi Jing*;
4. the **networking** of these figures in a treatise on the morphodynamics of flows — a logic of transformations consistent, in its structure, with that of **Clifford algebras**;
5. finally, **the integration of this logic** into the very fabric of civilisation, where knowledge, ritual and power are part of the same system of correspondences.

Such analytical patience is not an intellectual abstraction: it is rooted in the **organic realism of an agrarian civilisation**. In rural areas, the communal management of human and animal waste was part of everyday life. Far from being a source of shame, this cycle was seen as a collective duty: transforming waste into fertiliser, and fertiliser into fertility. This **circular economy of human waste** provided Chinese society with a constant model: that of concrete sublimation, where restraint, patience and recycling become moral virtues.

7. From rubbish to pure gold: two sides of the same coin

Semitic languages have preserved traces of this ambivalence between filth and excellence: the Arabic root **FDL** (فضل) means both "waste" (*faḍalāt*) and "superiority" or "refinement" (*faḍl*). Urdu broadens the scope even further: *faḍlah* refers to shit, *faḍīlat* to a blessing, and *faḍl* to a blessing. Even the root **RuH** (روح), "breath of the spirit", reverses its polarity when it becomes **HaR**, "shit". In French, Greek roots are a sign of refinement and erudition. Thus *κακός* (*kakos* = *bad*), found in *cacophony* or *cacochyme*, is also found in the childish French word *caca*: scholarly erudition meets childish shit.

These lexical ambivalences reinforce the Freudian idea: the sublimation of anality is the instinctual root of refinement and also of obsession when it fails.

Dictionaries of ancient languages — Semitic, but also Chinese — are on the surface of the unconscious: psychoanalysis and mythology appear on every page, because language is the accumulation of the dream layers of a civilisation. The interweaving of Chinese characters bears witness to a collective elaboration spanning thousands of years, where each sign condenses the memory of an experience, a gesture or a myth.

China did not repress anality, it **socialised** it. The work of the body and the land became the matrix of collective refinement. The energy that elsewhere is transformed into guilt or obsession circulates here as a principle of **community discipline** and **symbolic creation**. Where medieval Europe placed the spiritual in the fasting of Lent and the release of impulses in Carnival, China integrated both movements into a single flow: digestion, fermentation, transformation.

This **communal sublimation of anality** produced a temperament in which cleanliness is not a prohibition but a controlled circulation; where rigour is not neurotic but cosmological. It explains both the **obsessive perseverance of ideography** (the controlled neurotic side) and the **fever of divinatory interpretation** (the ritualised psychotic side), held in balance by the pragmatism of a sedentary civilisation subject to the rhythm of the seasons.

Thus, Chinese refinement does not arise from abstraction, but from **direct contact with matter**: from the patient gesture that accompanies the transmutation of excrement into fertiliser, fertiliser into food, food into culture, and culture into wisdom.

The *baptism of shit* imposed by the Cultural Revolution and experienced by President Xi confronted an entire generation of educated young people with the most extreme deprivation, stirring up a society that had remained highly stratified for millennia. This formidable ordeal gave rise to the unyielding political will of the Chinese elites to organise, within three decades, the urbanisation of **800 million** poor peasants, thus avoiding the proliferation of slums in the face of the massive rural exodus that industrialisation entailed: a first in the history of humanity.

This unprecedented mixing of the Chinese world was accompanied by a simplification of the writing system which, while making writing more accessible, led to a **collective repression** of an elitist Mandarin past. This reform was a **political** catharsis—a purge of social stratification—but also a **sinological loss**: the break with a formal continuity that linked the stroke to the breath, writing to meditation. Like mass culture vis-à-vis classical culture, this simplification levelled down a centuries-old refinement, trading symbolic depth for functional efficiency.

IV. The channelling of delirium: state divination

1. From interpretative outburst to social ritual

While the anal function found its material sublimation, the interpretative function – the human tendency to see signs everywhere – found an **institutional channel** in China: divination. Under the Shang (-1600, -1046) and Zhou (-1046, -256) dynasties, divination by reading cracks on cattle shoulder blades or hot-punched turtle shells was a state protocol. The cracks in the bones or shells were interpreted according to precise rules to guide political, agricultural and matrimonial decisions: everything depended on the scribe-diviners attached to the royal court.

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The state divination of ancient China institutionalised this process precisely:

1. **The "delirious outburst" is programmed**: it is not a spontaneous and distressing event. The consultation is an **official**, planned **ritual**, reserved for the elite (the king, the great lineages), to answer crucial questions of state (war, harvest, disease, founding of a city). Society awaits and provokes the "revelation".
2. **The "delusional crucible" is channelled according to a meticulous and highly codified protocol**:
 - **The Question (命辭, mingci)**: It is formulated precisely, often according to a binary structure ("It will rain / It will not rain").

- **The Act (hot punching):** The appearance of cracks on the bone or shell is not left to chance. It is a controlled technical act.
- **The Interpretation (占辭, zhanci):** This is not the result of an individual's free imagination. The cracks are read by specialists, scribe-diviners, according to a repertoire of shapes and signs. The interpretation is **collective and authorised**.

This ritual channels psychotic delirium:

- It frames the surge of meaning;
- It transforms excessive interpretation into public service;
- It connects the message of the invisible to concrete action.

Spontaneous "delirious outbursts" become **institutional divination**. The chaos of meaning is tamed by symbolic structure.

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V. Léon Vandermeersch: the two reasons for Chinese thought

Léon Vandermeersch, in *Les deux raisons de la pensée chinoise* (2013), masterfully showed that Chinese rationality is based on these two poles:

- **divinatory reason**, oriented towards correlation and hidden meaning;
- **ideographic reason**, oriented towards classification and visible form.

These two rationalities correspond exactly to the two sides of the human psyche: one interpretative and ecstatic (psychotic); the other orderly and controlled (obsessive). China, instead of suffering from their excesses, has **institutionalised** them.

Psychic pole	Potential excess	Chinese institution	Effect
Unlimited interpretation	Delirium, psychosis	State divination	Ritualisation of meaning
Excessive control	Obsessive neurosis	Ideography, calligraphy	Aesthetic sublimation

This dual integration has produced a **civilisation of elegant channelling**: magical thinking and logical thinking coexist without excluding each other, balanced within the same symbolic order.

VI. Engineering collective psychological balance

By connecting the three levels – physical, social, symbolic – Chinese civilisation can be described as an **engineering of sublimation**:

Level	Basic drive	Cultural mechanism	Psychological outcome
Physical	Expulsion/retention	Ecology of excrement	Functional harmony
Cognitive	Interpretation / delirium	State divination	Mastered symbolic thinking
Graphics	Control / perfection	Ideography and calligraphy	Meticulousness, refinement

The whole forms a system of exceptional coherence: impulses are not repressed but recycled, impurity is not denied but valued, magical thinking is not banned but ritualised. The result is a collective temperament where discipline and flexibility coexist, where rigour serves grace, elegance and refinement.

VII. A foreshadowing of universal mathematical structures

The **scribe-diviners** of ancient China, attached to the royal and ducal courts of the **Shang** dynasty, laid the **intellectual foundations of Chinese civilisation**.

Through persistent, meticulous and refined work of **divination, archiving and classification** of oracles, they developed a veritable database of human destiny, recording the divinatory reports of royalty on **turtle shells and bovine shoulder blades** in several successive stages:

1. **The recording of oracles.**

Divination operations first gave rise to **inscriptions on bones and shells**, which gradually generated **ideography** and constituted a vast **archive of** carefully preserved **oracles**.

2. **The classification of cases.**

After several centuries, faced with new questions, the scribes asked themselves: "*We must have a similar precedent already archived.*"

This comparative approach led to **the grouping of consultations into 64 typical cases**, a veritable matrix of possible situations in life and government.

3. **Symbolic formalisation.**

These sixty-four archetypes were gradually symbolised by **configurations of six solid or broken lines**, giving rise to **the 64 hexagrams of the Yi Jing**.

At the same time, reflection on the **processes of generation** led to the theory of **the five generating elements (Wu Xing)**, describing the **cycles of generation (sheng)** and **control (ke)** that govern the natural and social world.

It is remarkable that this dual **structure—the 64 hexagrams of the Yi Jing** and the **five elements of the Wu Xing**—anticipates the major formal frameworks of contemporary thought:

- **Clifford algebras with 64 elements** $Cl(6,0)$, which can be found even in the **structure of the 64 codons** of protein biosynthesis;
- and the **generating pentads** highlighted by British physicist **Peter Rowlands**, which form the basis of all algebraic structures.

This correspondence reveals a profound continuity between ancient symbolic forms and contemporary mathematical formulations, both of which express the same structures using the tools available at each period.

Thus, over a period of 1,800 years, from the Shang (-1600) to the Han (+200) dynasties, ancient China developed a **universal symbolic grammar** in which the transformations of the visible and invisible world are described according to laws that prefigure those formulated today by contemporary physics through mathematics.

VIII. A civilisation in harmony with the structure of the cosmos

Finally, if the Chinese Empire called itself "**Celestial**," it was because it was clearly aware that it embodied a **millennia-old ambition to align itself with Heaven**—not in a metaphorical sense, but as a genuine project of conformity between the earthly order and the cosmic order.

This intuition is now strikingly confirmed by the Janus cosmological model proposed by Jean-Pierre Petit. According to this model, the universe consists of two twin cosmoses, positive and negative (one could also say yin and yang), each containing matter and antimatter, i.e. four types of

matter: M+, AM+, M- and AM-. Matter of the same sign attracts each other according to Newton's law, while matter of opposite signs repel each other according to an anti-Newtonian gravitational law.

Thus, the **four-term dynamic logic of the Yi Jing** — *young yin, old yin, young yang, old yang* — appears to **be structurally consistent** with that of **the bicosmos** described by Jean-Pierre Petit: in both cases, universal homeostasis is at work thanks to four terms in **attractive and repulsive** interactions, which ensure the stability of the whole while orchestrating its permanent evolution.

IX. Conclusion

The Chinese temperament — patient, methodical, persevering and refined — thus appears to be the result of a long **symbolic domestication** of instinctual forces. China has chosen **functional sublimation**: transforming what is base into useful, what is confused into meaningful, what is instinctual into ritual.

This middle path, far from the neurotic and psychotic extremes, forms the basis of **a stable cultural psyche**: discipline is not repression, but the channelling of energies; meticulousness is not obsession, but perfection; perseverance is not stubbornness, but fidelity to the cycle of the world.

Thus, China did not only invent political wisdom; it invented an **elegant psychic ecology**, where the cosmos, matter, spirit, the individual and society respond to each other in a continuous cycle of transformation and sublimation according to universal laws.

In its efforts to integrate the Industrial Revolution after the "**century of humiliation**" (1842-1949), China had to rapidly assimilate Western thought and methods, relegating its traditional culture to the status of symbolic heritage rather than an operational tool. The above developments aim to **complement the proposal for celestial AI (Tian Dao AI) in the humanities**, in order to help **rehabilitate, in the eyes of the Chinese people, the dignity, genius and practical fruitfulness of their tradition**, whose profound coherence remains a model for the future.

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